

Student Feedback to Enhance Student Support Services in a Blackboard Community: A Quality Improvement Project

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Abstract On-line Nurse Practitioner (NP) programs require a unique set of support services to promote student engagement and success. This study used a descriptive mixed-methods approach to better understand the use of a NP Blackboard® Community for providing student support services by examining student feedback related to utilization and sense of community. Forty-nine percent of students surveyed accessed the NP Community 2 to 5 times per semester while the remaining 51% accessed the site less frequently. The NP Community was most useful in providing students with information needed for clinical placements and it was a close second to Facebook for fostering a sense of community among students (50% and 44 % respectively). Provision of an effective NP Blackboard® Community for providing support services requires creative management and on-going evaluation. Today's students are immersed in technology that offers virtually instantaneous forms communicating, finding information and retrieving data. Strategies for incorporating newer social media applications for providing support services and fostering a sense of community should be considered.

Keywords: nurse practitioner, nursing student, education, distance education

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1. Introduction

Student services are the resources that a college or university provides to facilitate the learning process [1]. They are comprised of the nonacademic support services such as admissions, enrollment, registration, and advising. Numerous online programs, especially those with a clinical component, require essential student support services that differ from traditional student services provided by the university [2].

Nurse Practitioner (NP) programs require a unique set of student support services related primarily to clinical skills acquisition and NP role development. These support services include but are not limited to 1) orientation to clinical practicum courses, 2) preparing and supporting students through clinical rotations, 3) on-campus activities such as Standardized Patient (SP) experiences or Objective Standardized Clinical Experiences (OSCE) for hybrid or combination programs, 4) networking and 5) information related to national organizations and national certification.

Distance education for Nurse Practitioner education started at GW with a Family Nurse Practitioner Program (FNP) in 2005. During the following year, faculty recognized the need for a mechanism to communicate with students and disseminate important information. A

FNP Blackboard® Community was created as a go-to resource for students. It provided information on program outcomes, faculty and staff, clinical, and other pertinent resources. Four years later when an Adult Nurse Practitioner (now Adult-gerontology Primary Care Nurse Practitioner [AGPCNP]) was launched, a separate ANP Blackboard® Community was created.

In 2013, seven years had elapsed since the initiation of the Communities. Faculty and staff observed that information provided in each of two Communities was similar and even redundant. To ensure accuracy and consistency of information distributed to students, the FNP and AGPCNP Communities were combined into one NP Community.

After creating one NP Community faculty and staff still questioned the utility of the site and how often it was being accessed by students. Although the NP Community had been in existence since 2008, its effectiveness had never been evaluated. Faculty and staff decided that in order to close the identified gaps, a better understanding of students' usage of the NP Community was essential. They determined that student feedback would provide faculty and staff with more confidence in knowing that the program support services being offered were not only effective but they also generated a sense of connectedness, support and self-sufficiency.

Educators and administrators need to examine not only the effectiveness of their program support services but

also how well these services meld with the university's support services. For example, is there overlap or redundancy between support services offered by the program and those offered by the university? Do opportunities exist for creating convenient links between the two? Students who enroll in distance education programs expect ease and efficiency when using technology to interact with an institution [3].

It is now recognized that student support services are critical to retention and success in online programs [4]. Examining NP program support services for not only effectiveness but also for generating a sense of connectedness and supporting students throughout their online educational experience helps to promote student success and retention. In addition, fostering learner centeredness through the creation of self-reliant and self-sufficient methods for NP students to obtain vital program information is a hallmark of adult education.

The purpose of this descriptive mixed-methods study is to better understand how students utilized a NP Blackboard Community® for providing support services by examining 1) how often students accessed the site 2) usefulness of site content 4) the sense of community among students.

2. Methodology

This descriptive/mixed method study examined: 1) how often students accessed the NP Blackboard® Community 2) content found most useful 3) opinions about the site and 4) if the site fostered a sense of community among students.

2.1. Sample

A sample of convenience of NP students who were enrolled in classes during the Fall of 2013 or Spring of 2014 was selected for this study. Institutional Review Board approval was obtained for this study. Participants were recruited via e-mail over a period of one month.

2.2. Instruments

An 18 Likert-type question survey tool was created using an electronic survey tool. The demographic questions included age, gender, geographic location, student status, level of computer literacy, and employment status. In order to determine usage and usefulness, a set of questions were created to determine the number of times students accessed the NP Community each semester, rate of usefulness of each section and preferred method of communication with the school. Students were asked, when compared with social media applications such as Linked-In and Facebook how did the NP community rank in fostering a sense of community. Open ended questions were included for additional comments.

2.3. Procedure

Students enrolled in the NP program during Fall 2013 or Spring 2014 were sent an e-mail that described the purpose of the study. Students were invited to participate in the study by completing a survey that took, on average, 10 minutes to complete. It was emphasized that that

participation did not in any way affect grades and the survey was completely anonymous.

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive Statistics

3.1.1. Age

Fifty one students volunteered and filled out the survey. [Table 1](#) shows the modal group and range for age for participants in the study.

Table 1. Student Age

Modal Group and Age Range		
Age	Modal Group	Range
	25 - 28	22 - 50+

3.1.2. First-time on-line Students

Fifty four percent of students who participated in the study were first time online students. See [Table 2](#).

Table 2. Nurse Practitioner Student Demographics

Characteristics	N	Percentage
Sex		
Male	4	7.84%
Female	47	92.16%
First time online-student		
Yes	27	54%
No	23	46%
Computer Skills		
Advanced	18	36%
Intermediate	32	64%
Basic	0	0%
Student Status		
Part-Time	34	68%
Full-Time	16	32%
Employment		
Not working	7	14%
Part-Time	17	34%
Full-Time	26	52%
Program		
MSN	43	86%
Post Master's Cert.	3	6%
DNP	5	10%

3.1.3. Computer Skills

Most students or 64% rated their computer skills as Intermediate. Eighteen percent rated their computer skills as advanced and none of the participants rated their skills as basic. See [Table 2](#).

3.1.4. Student and Employment Status

The majority of students was first-time online students (54%), attended graduate school as part-time students (68%) and worked full-time (52%). See [Table 2](#).

3.1.5. Program

The majority of respondents were in the Masters of Science in Nursing (MSN) program (86%), while 10% of students reported to be in the Doctorate of Nursing Program (DNP) program. See Table 2.

The majority of students lived in either Virginia (22%) or Maryland (24%). Other students resided in Alaska, California, Michigan, Minnesota, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New Mexico, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Texas, Utah, Vermont, Washington, and Washington, DC. See Figure 1.

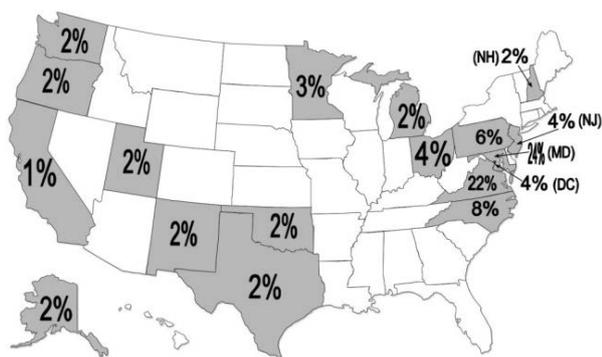


Figure 1. Student Geographic Location

3.2. Communication with the School

Students preferred email as their method of communication with the School of Nursing (77.55%), followed by the NP Community (20%) and Phone (4%). Students felt that they fostered a sense of community with other students by using Facebook (50%), followed by the NP Community (44%). Sixty percent of students were members of the NP Facebook Group, a site created by students, in which only students are allowed to participate. The top discussion topics within the NP Facebook Group were Clinical Preceptors (55%), Books Sales or Sharing (48.5 %), and Career Networking (40%). See Table 2 and Table 3.

Table 3. Student Communication with the School

Method	1 st Choice (Percent)	2 nd Choice (Percent)	3 rd Choice (Percent)
SON Nurse Practitioner Blackboard Community	20%	58%	22%
Via E-mail	77.55%	22.45%	0%
Via Phone	4%	20%	76%

Table 4. Fostering a Sense of Community

Method	1 st Choice	2 nd Choice	3 rd Choice
Linked-In	6%	20%	74%
Facebook	50%	36%	14%
SON Nurse Practitioner Blackboard Community	44%	44%	12%

3.3. Usage and Usefulness of the SON Nurse Practitioner Blackboard Community

Students reported that they accessed the NP Community 2 - 5 times per semester (48.98%). Table 4 shows how students rank the usefulness of each section.

The following table shows the highest percentage of students that ranked a section as either “Very Useful,” “Useful” or “I have not used this section”.

Table 5. SON Nurse Practitioner Blackboard Community Content Areas and Ratings

Very Useful	Percent
Clinical Forms and Documents	64
Clinical Information	64
On Campus Experiences	44
Announcements	40
Book Information	40
E*Value	38.78
Program Outcomes	22

Useful	Percentage
Faculty & Staff Info	48.98%
HIPPAA/OSHA	40%
Course Descriptions	34.69%
Course Registration	32.65%
Master’s Portfolio	28.57%
Discussion Board	28.57%

I have not used this section	Percentage
Stress Management	54.17%
International Experiences	50%
VPN Access	42.86%
Tools	41.67%
Program Completion/National Certification/Beginning Practice	37.5%
Scholarships	37.5%
Student Resources at GW	39.58%

3.4. Open-Ended Question Results

The survey asked students to share any comments they had regarding the NP Community and to also provide thoughts on information they would like to see added to the NP Community. Through these open ended responses, five common themes were identified.

3.4.1. No Updates Needed

“I think that the information located on the NP Blackboard Community is sufficient and quite informative.”

“The updated clinical information recently added was very useful and helped clear up a lot of confusion regarding clinical placement details.”

3.4.2. Discussion Board

“It would be nice to see posts [sic] meet up with classmates whom live in your area. Or different threads on the discussion board per state encouraging meeting up.”

“Information was good but I was hoping for a forum to get in touch with class members. It was difficult going to graduation and not knowing anyone.”

3.4.3. Updated Information

“These sections should have a ‘last updated’ date, i.e. book information. I am an unable to find basic information such as start dates for when clinicals can begin. This would be very helpful for proactive students.”

3.4.4. Consistency of Information

“It would be nice if program info was delivered in one spot instead of different professor answering questions differently within their specific course they are teaching.”

3.4.5. Orientation

“The Blackboard Community should be made a part of orientation and to refer to it for all the standard information.”

4. Discussion

A convenience sample of 51 NP students responded to the NP Blackboard® Community Survey. The findings in this study provide valuable information on how a sample of NP students in an online program utilizes a Blackboard® Community to provide student support services and foster a sense of community. It was found that almost half (49%) of the participants accessed the NP Community 2 to 5 times per semester. The remaining participants accessed the site less frequently. Student responses to the question “how do you foster a sense of community” may explain why access to the community was 2 to 5 times per semester or less.

Half of the participants rated Facebook as their number one choice for fostering a sense of community. Numerous studies demonstrate social networking sites as places where students establish a feeling of sense of community. The majority of students in this survey were between 25 to 28 years of age, placing them in the millennial generation [7]. Millennials grew up with technology. In fact, 81% of millennials are on social media [8]. Between 2011 and 2014, there was a 32.6% growth in new Facebook users between the ages of 25 to 34 years of age [9].

The current generation of students thrives on virtual connections, interactions and communications for seeking out and retrieving information [10]. Moreover, they trust information obtained from online friends and peers whereas earlier generations of learners generally relied on authority figures for acquiring information [10]. While some educators believe that social media applications, such as Facebook, are student-only unsecured places, many are pushing for higher education to embrace social media as a place for engaging and supporting students [11].

The NP Blackboard Community contained over 20 content area sections. Participants in this study found information related to clinical, on-campus experiences and international experiences most useful. Information that faculty and staff considered very useful to NP students such as Program Completion, National Certification and Beginning Practice as well as Scholarships was not accessed by participants in this study. An explanation could be that faculty place information related to Program Completion, National Certification and Beginning Practice information in their course shells. In addition, there is a scholarship section on the School of Nursing website. While faculty and staff thought that placing the information in the NP Community would make it easy for the students, the redundancy was not necessary. Rather than duplicating information, it is possible that embedded links to the original source may help to reduce redundancy and serve as a reminder of available resources.

Qualitative responses revealed the need for stringent management of the NP Community as well as frequent evaluation. Students noted that updated information and consistency of information was important to them yet lacking. Students also felt that the discussion board had

the potential to be a great networking tool for students yet it needed to be better managed.

5. Recommendations

The authors recommend a variety of tools when planning the revitalization or creation of a community to provide program student support services. First, evaluation is critical. Take the time to develop a survey that will determine who your students are, their characteristics, their needs, and provide an opportunity to give ample feedback. Be sure to review this assessment when making updates and changes to your program’s community.

Next, create a management plan for your community. Determine who is going to manage it, facilitate the discussion board and update content. Ensure that the management plan is followed. It is important that the person who manages this Community takes ownership and values its content as well.

Lastly, take the time to benchmark and network with other programs that are similar to your program. Discover best practices, find what works for others, and build relationships in the process. The authors have identified benchmarking will their next step.

6. Conclusion

Program student support services are vital to NP programs. Planning, design, management and evaluation are critical factors for success of a Community. An evaluation may uncover areas for improvement and help to formulate a management plan that ensures accuracy and consistency of information. In addition, it serves to streamline processes thus avoiding redundancy. The impact of social media cannot be overlooked when trying to create a sense of community among students and disseminate information within a program sponsored site. A Community can serve as a vital place for faculty and staff to house important information for NP students from admission to graduation.

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